

Discussion guide

‘After all, it was Europe that made the modern world’:
Eurocentrism in history and its textbooks



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'Race' and Africa in Portugal:

A study on history textbooks

This booklet is based on the results of the research project **'Race' and Africa in Portugal: a study on history textbooks** (see methodological attachment) carried out between September 2008 and February 2012. The project's main goal was an interdisciplinary analysis of the (re)production of Eurocentrism in school history textbooks used at Key Stage 3 in Portugal (12 to 15 year olds), taking into account the contexts in which they are produced, disseminated and consumed. The analysis focused on the way in which Eurocentrism – as a paradigm for the production and interpretation of knowledge – naturalises the absence of African history and renders racism invisible.

In order to disseminate the most relevant aspects of the research, we have summarised the project's approach to the study of history textbooks and key ideas such as 'race', racism and Eurocentrism, with the aim of contributing to debates on education – and, in particular, the teaching of history – which is seen as reflecting and consolidating broader political, social, cultural and economic struggles. The project also considered aspects relevant to the definition of public policies, associated with curriculum guidelines, school textbooks and classroom practice, thus contributing towards establishing an anti-racist approach to education and learning about history.

Key ideas

Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is more than mere ethnocentrism, i.e. the perspective from which each *people* tells *their* history. Eurocentrism is a **model of interpreting (past, present and future) reality** that uncritically establishes the idea of Europe's historical progress and political and ethical superiority, based on scientific rationality and the construction of the rule of law. In this sense, it is essential to debate Eurocentrism as crucial to the formation of western knowledge and a certain historical mapping of the world that unambiguously establishes which events and processes are relevant and how they are interpreted, by simultaneously *discovering* and *covering* them.

In order to understand the consequences of Eurocentrism for the way in which we produce and understand history, it is vital to question the fundamental basis of the **centuries-old project of modernity: colonialism/racism**. This is because, according to authors such as Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano and Sylvia Wynter, Eurocentrism began with the colonisation of 'America' in the 15th and 16th centuries and involved two related processes: the construction of the idea of 'race' and the gradual establishment of capitalism as a global standard for labour and market control.

As pointed out by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in the absence of any critical questioning of how the making of knowledge, laws and rights is intertwined with colonialism, certain concepts and historical processes that define **modern societies** are sanitised. These societies are generally represented as the product of Christianisation, industrialisation and urbanisation, understood as a *successful* process of acquiring rights and socio-economic welfare which progressively established key ideas such as the nation state, democracy and citizenship. Although the definition of these terms is quite problematic, they are currently part of the common language that distinguishes a modern from a pre-modern society (the latter seen as having traces of 'primitivism', 'anachronistic traditions', 'endemic violence', etc.)

Eurocentrism has remained dominant today through the **naturalisation of certain political projects** (e.g. the suitability of the national curricula with a view to integration within European Union) and by **making other knowledges and movements that contest this irrelevant** (e.g. struggles for the memorialisation of slavery or the public recognition of the genocide of the Roma during the Holocaust).

In this sense, while it has become commonplace to observe that *history is written by the winners*, a more or less explicit consensus has been established that proclaims **the need to maintain a 'positive' view of national and European history** – although incorporating elements of the view from 'the other side' to correct possible nationalistic or Europeanist excesses. In contrast, we argue that the education of 'critical minds' crucially demands discussing the legacies of colonialism, slavery and racism. Aspects normally presented as *positive* within these processes only make sense to those who have benefitted from them, whilst making it impossible to build a national/European 'we' based on concepts of equality and justice.

'History textbooks in Portugal still perpetuate the same imperialistic visions that emerged during the '3rd empire' of the New State dictatorship. We talk about the Europeans encountering other peoples, but not about what Europe imposed on numerous peoples and cultures. We treat slavery and the forced use of people to build 'Portuguese' monuments throughout the world as something normal and natural. We are brought up to regard ourselves as superior beings, as evangelisers and owners of the truth. But there's another history. The one that is not taught, the one that no-one ever talks about.'

(anonymous online comment on the article: History textbooks still describe the world according to the *New State*, *Público* newspaper, 27.03.2011)

History and its teaching

A critical approach to Eurocentrism requires bringing the relationship between power, knowledge and 'race' to the centre of debates about history and history teaching. This is essential in order to overcome the conventional definition of history as the 'scientific study of the past' and to discuss – both in the curriculum and in the classroom – how 'national', 'European' and 'world' history has been constructed. By **considering the way in which power relations permeate the production of interpretations of the past**, this approach will facilitate the opening up of a critical debate on narratives of national identity, namely those related to the presumed homogeneity of the Portuguese nation or to its *benevolent* colonialism, **favouring the understanding of 'race' and racism as historical phenomena and their relevance to understanding the present.**

'I am of African descent, born here after [the revolution of] the 25 April [1974] and I'm not particularly activist, but I would like to tell you about the anger I used to feel in History and Portuguese classes (with 'Os Lusíadas'). First, those were classes in which, all of a sudden, I couldn't be part of the 'We' – 'We found', 'We colonised', 'We were very good', 'Those were the golden days of our history' – and then I felt there were lies and omissions by the dozen. Because nobody talked about the resistance of the peoples of these countries (in Guinea, there was armed resistance from the beginning), nobody talked about the rape, theft and genocide that these things have always implied. The chiefs ('régulos') were always presented as some kind of 'fools' that were amazed by the caravels and surrendered straight away'

(anonymous online comment on the article: History textbooks describe the world according to the *New State*, *Público* newspaper, 27.03.2011)

Modern school

In the past two centuries **modern schools** have been **instrumental in building and consolidating the nation state**, i.e. a political community understood as an ethnic, linguistic and religious national unity established in a particular territory. Although this homogenising process has always been disputed, school is still a crucial space for eliminating the diversity of student subjectivities through cultural standardisation and the promotion of Eurocentric knowledge structures. In recent decades, the solutions proposed for a greater *respect for diversity* (e.g. multiperspectivism in history, the multicultural curriculum or intercultural dialogue) have not been able to challenge Eurocentrism as a paradigm of knowledge. The prevailing approach therefore guarantees Europe's status as a *producer* of history – although accommodating and validating other narratives.

Multiperspectivism in history textbooks

Recently, there has been a trend towards introducing contrasting perspectives on certain processes or historical events in textbooks, in order to present a more complete vision of history. One example is the juxtaposition of arguments by António Salazar and Amílcar Cabral in Year 9 textbooks. Despite variations found in the excerpts presented, in general the following ideas are contrasted: Salazar's 'opinion' or 'position' on Portugal's 'civilising mission', and the denunciation of colonialism by Cabral, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde ('Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde – PAIGC). Consider the following two examples:

example 1

'The rich, large and very sparsely populated colonial territories naturally supplement metropolitan agriculture and raw materials for industry, as well as containing the surplus population from the metropolis (...)

As for us, the path followed is defined by integration into a Unitary State, consisting of scattered provinces and different races (...). We believe there are decadent or retarded races, however they may be termed, with whom we share the responsibility of civilisation.'

Salazar, *Speeches*, Coimbra, 1957

'For Africans, Portuguese colonialism is hell (...). Portugal is an underdeveloped country with a 40% illiteracy rate and living standards which are the lowest in Europe. If it could have a civilising influence on any people it would be some kind of miracle. (...)

In order to protect Portuguese industries at risk, Africans are forced to buy second-rate Portuguese products, at high prices and sell their products to traders at much lower prices

than those they will get on resale.'

Amílcar Cabral, *Selected Works*, Lisbon, 1972

example 2

'Salazar's position

We are now in the fourth year of struggles and has there been any gain from the people's money, the soldiers' blood, the mothers' tears? I dare say, yes. On an international level, the Portuguese position was initially condemned and there are still those who question that position today (...). On an African level, four years of sacrifices, gains and losses have provided enough time for several African peoples to become more understanding of the realities. This is the gain in this battle, which we fight without alliances, proudly alone.'

Salazar's speech, on 18 February 1965

'The position of the leader of an independence movement

Eleven million Africans are under Portuguese colonial domination. Despite the wealth of natural resources, some of which are exploited by colonialists, Africans have below subsistence living standards. Their situation is that of servants in their own country.

When the United Nations adopted the Charter (1945) that recognises the right of all peoples to self-determination, Portugal quickly modified its Constitution, replacing the term 'colony' with 'overseas province', thus enabling it to say there were no colonies and, therefore, no reports on the "African territories" had to be presented'

Amílcar Cabral, *Selected Works*, Lisbon, 1972

Despite the opposing positions, the textbooks do not adequately present the political context of colonialism and the struggles for national liberation, meaning that Amílcar Cabral's discourse is reduced to criticism of the capacity of the Portuguese colonial project to carry out its civilising mission. At the same time, the individualisation of the authoritarian figure of Salazar, as well as the idea of the New State as an anachronism within the international context of the recognition within the international context of the recognition of the right to self-determination, do not lead to any questioning of colonialism as a political project. Thus, there is no focus on any critical analysis of the laws and policies implemented by the colonial administration, although this is central to the work of Amílcar Cabral and is clear in the omitted paragraph that follows the quotes in the textbooks:

'After the slave trade, armed conquest and colonial wars, there came the complete destruction of the economic and social structures of African society. The next phase was European occupation and ever-increasing European immigration into these territories. The

lands and possessions of Africans were looted, Portuguese «sovereignty tax» was imposed, and so were compulsory crops for agricultural produce, forced labour, the export of African workers, and total control of the collective and individual life of Africans, either by persuasion or violence.

As the size of the European population grows, so does its contempt for Africans. Africans are excluded from certain types of employment, including some of the most unskilled jobs. Racial discrimination is either openly or hypocritically practiced.'

Amílcar Cabral, *Selected Works – Unity and Struggle Vol. I*, 1976



'Consequences of an ambush of a Portuguese unit in Guinea-Bissau, in 1966'



'Portuguese soldiers captured by Angolan guerrillas'

The current way in which this information is presented ends up by naturalising or silencing the violent nature of colonialism. This process is reinforced through the inclusion – on the same page on which the above excerpts appear – of a set of images of the national liberation movements that portray them as a group of violent 'rebels' or 'guerrillas', tables giving figures for deaths and losses during the colonial regime, questions such as 'Which position do you agree with most?', and other proposed activities that encourage students to identify with 'Portuguese people living in Portugal'.

It is important to emphasise that textbooks from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s present narratives that are more critical of this political process:

'Dependent peoples awoke to the struggle for liberation and thus the final stage in the abolition of imperialism began. (...) The struggle for liberation of colonial peoples is the main characteristic, or, it could be said, the driving force behind the march of history in our times: it is within this struggle, this conflict in three continents, that our struggle for national liberation from Portuguese colonialism belongs (Amílcar Cabral).' (Maria Luísa Guerra, *History 9*, 1983)

The study of History textbooks

In the present context, history textbooks constitute the *de facto curriculum*, as they are the most commonly used educational resource in the teaching-learning process. Combining imaginaries on history and national identity, they constitute particularly interesting objects of research and have been widely studied. However, both these studies and the broader political debates have generally restricted their analyses to two questions: a) the *stereotyped* representations of the ‘other’ and their correction; b) the *excess* of nationalism in education and the focus on European and world history as a solution. Although raising relevant points, neither of these approaches questions the broader narrative in which these representations are inscribed and that guarantees the perpetuation of Eurocentrism – seen as *natural*. In fact, **little relevance has been attributed to questions related to Eurocentrism and racism in the production of knowledge, in particular historical knowledge.**

The project’s approach

This study therefore proposed **an innovative approach** based on two main aspects. Firstly, it involved overcoming analyses limited to approaching the need to debate history and national identity as emerging from processes outside the production of historical knowledge itself, such as the growing ethnic diversity of national societies and the supposed challenges of globalisation. To this end, we questioned the naturalisation of the **assumption of national homogeneity** underlying these perspectives, as well as the idea that history should only be expanded to accommodate the ‘sensibilities’ of so-called ethnic minorities. Secondly, it involved a critical analysis of the **depoliticised debates surrounding colonialism, slavery and racism**, which have been very significant in the Portuguese context.

The political, global, regional and national context

The study also considered the national and broader international political contexts. In particular, we explored the role of scientific discourse in the international context which led to the constitution of global and regional organisations such as **UNESCO** and the **European Council**, noting the silencing/evasion of the

‘But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best?’

I answer no.

And I say that between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance.’

(Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 1955)

history of colonialism and its consequences for understanding (anti-)racism in history teaching. We also examined certain initiatives, projects and specific debates, including those promoted by the **National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries**. We therefore questioned perspectives that view the relationship between knowledge and power simply as a question related to the *misuse* or *abuse* of scientific knowledge – especially by dictatorial regimes and extremist political groups. In particular, we considered the centrality of approaches that emphasise the role of science in the institutionalisation of historical truth and in providing answers to social problems.

This framework has influenced debates on the teaching of history and favoured *ad hoc* solutions – e.g. the enlargement of national history to a European scale or the occasional inclusion of contrasting perspectives on the same event – which do not substantially challenge the ways in which Eurocentrism pervades the broader narrative.

On a national level, it became evident that these measures have not had a significant impact on the structures and canons of formal education, despite the visibility of public initiatives surrounding cultural diversity since the 1990s. This is especially evident in history teaching, which has been the subject of debates focussing mainly on its *status*, or the policing of *mistakes* detected in textbooks. **The few innovations that have been introduced** – both in curricula and textbooks – have been **incapable of challenging the broader narratives** that naturalise the absence of African history – beyond those related to the *contact* established by Europeans – or render the violence of colonial power invisible, since it is portrayed as ‘expansion’ and reduced to mere ‘discoveries’ and ‘contact between peoples’. It should be stressed that these pedagogical narratives have considerable political and academic support, thus reproducing certain discourses and silences concerning questions of power and ‘race’.

Eurocentrism in History textbooks

The **analysis of history textbooks used in Key State 3 (Years 7-9) in Portugal** led us to conclude that the construction and consolidation of Eurocentrism has been supported by three narrative formulas:

1) A linear narrative that positions the 'other' in a different time from the European present

In history textbooks, the 'other' is systematically located in a different time from European time and in an earlier state of civilisation and development, being presented as 'primitive' and 'barbarian'. The idea that the 'other' is in a different – i.e. *previous* – stage contributes towards conceiving of difference as distance. This idea naturalises the hierarchy of different societies, contributing to classifying some societies as 'qualified' for the status of 'civilisation' and others as *still* living in 'archaic' conditions. According to Eric Wolf, this representation of time and space turns history into a sequence of 'moral successes', in which *mandatory* goal of development is modernisation, as defined by Europe.



example

'Doc. 3 Producing fire. Some peoples, like these inhabitants of the interior of Africa, still use primitive processes to produce 'fire'.

(History textbook, Year 7)

[Note: this type of picture is used repeatedly in the textbooks analysed, conveying an imagery of Africa and of 'black' populations as 'primitive'].

2) The national (democratic) State as a paradigm of political organisation

The complex process of establishing 'society' as equivalent to 'nation' (one community, one language, one culture, in a territory with clearly-defined borders) is naturalised in textbooks. The nation state, as historically constructed from the European (colonial) context, is generalised and emerges as the ultimate model of political organisation. This approach neglects the political characteristics of different forms of organisation, and is clear in the representation of Africa – portrayed as a territory with no forms of political organisation until the arrival of Europeans. It ultimately reinforces the European narrative (specifically, the Portuguese one) which legitimises colonialism as a *natural* civilisational process. Thus, the exclusion and violence inherent in the formation of nation states and colonialism – **religious and ethno-racial**

homogenisation and extermination processes – are presented as *necessary* steps to the current configuration of democratic societies. This naturalisation is clear in the description of the formation of the modern states of Portugal and Spain and the so-called *Reconquest* (*'Reconquista'*).

example

'The Christian reaction. Some Goth nobles could therefore hide in those difficult mountain areas (the Asturias and Pyrenees) and, with the support of the local populations, continued to resist. From there, they began the military offensive and geographical expansion southwards. The military operations (...) are usually called the Reconquest ('Reconquista'), since they involved reconquering territories that had already been Christian. The peninsular Reconquest would last for hundreds of years.'

(History textbook, Year 7)

Although some violent processes are presented – such as the so-called religious wars and the extermination of Amerindian populations – they are not explained in a way that questions the narrative of how Europe became a centre for economic and cultural control and for the production of knowledge. At the same time, ethno-cultural heterogeneity in Africa – portrayed as a set of small, irreconcilable 'tribes' – is considered a source of problems, political tensions and violence, i.e. a factor explaining its assumed historical inability to produce democratic and prosperous societies.

3) *The definitive connection between 'race'/racism and certain spatiotemporal contexts*

Racism is understood in textbooks as a historical phenomenon linked to the so-called *new imperialism* of the 19th century (particularly evident in the approach to British and French colonialism), to Italian fascism and to German Nazism. As a consequence, the role played by Portuguese and Spanish colonialism in the emergence and consolidation of ideas of 'purity of blood', 'race' and racist forms of governance since the 15th and 16th centuries is neglected (e.g. the persecution and deportation of Jews and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, the legislation on control of the Gypsy population or the system of transatlantic slavery). Racism is also mentioned when describing the 'situation of minorities' in certain western societies in the mid-20th century, especially the struggle for civil rights in the United States in the 1960s, and the South African Apartheid regime. This narrative contributes towards locating racism outside the European arena (with the exception of the Holocaust), decoupling 'race' from the process of constructing European modernity and western nation states. As a consequence, racism is approached as an extremist ideology, rather than a pervasive phenomenon inherent to contemporary societies and a legacy of colonialism and slavery.

The way in which Portuguese colonialism is reported in textbooks limits the possibilities of students being able to critically understand the processes of dehumanising 'slaves' – and, in general, the colonised

populations – and of racism as a phenomenon inseparable from colonialism, and therefore of being able to think about its consequences in contemporary societies. Racist practices – although seen as ‘reprehensible’ – are presented as restricted to the *mentality* of certain times and the ‘positive’ consequences of colonialism are emphasised.

example

'The trade in slaves, destined for America and Europe, was one of the main elements of cultural exchange between these continents, leading to the emergence of mixed-race communities. This acculturation can also be seen in the official languages of Central and South America, which are derived from Portuguese and Spanish'.

(History textbook, Year 8)

Final remarks

Eurocentrism is a paradigm – hegemonic today – that organises the way in which we understand and transmit (historical) knowledge from certain interpretations of (past, present and future) reality.

'An overall sketch of world historical production through time suggests that professional historians alone do not set the narrative framework into which their histories fit. Most often, someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycles of silences.'

(Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 1995)

Eurocentrism was forged from the historical process of colonial domination and the formation of the European states, from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards. Only by explaining this process and its contemporary implications in depth will it be possible to promote a more critical historical knowledge. This requires taking into consideration the political processes underlying the production of knowledge and certain ways of narrating history that are usually presented as neutral (e.g. Christianisation and colonialism).

The effectiveness of colonialism does not rest solely on the transmission of prejudiced representation of the 'other' (e.g. images of black Africans as primitive). It is through the *naturalisation* of power relations – rendering these representations plausible – that Eurocentrism is effectively reproduced and harder to challenge. Thus, the *correction* of the stereotyped descriptions of some populations does not prevent the continuing naturalisation of the *irrelevance* of certain events (e.g. the debate on human rights that takes the French Revolution as its background but fails to consider the successful revolution of the enslaved populations in Haiti) or of other cultures and forms of socio-political organisation (e.g. the history of Africa beyond *contact* with Europeans).

It is also essential that 'other' histories are included in the learning process and in current debates, and that we rethink the way 'our' identity is narrated. A deeper knowledge of world history is, in fact, imperative. Yet, world history should not be a mere appendix; it should instead lead to a (re)consideration of the dominant ideas of 'European' history and historiography, as well as their centrality (e.g. learning about non-western ideas and philosophies will help in contextualising notions of 'reason' and 'knowledge', and understanding how, at a certain time, these notions became dominant).

Teacher training and teaching practice should, therefore, be thought out on the basis of innovative approaches that stimulate students' understanding of the production of history, in light of what has been

done in other contexts (e.g. the *School History Project* in the United Kingdom). To this end, it is necessary to move beyond conventional definitions of history as the ‘scientific study of the past’ and promote discussion of how power relations permeate the production of interpretations of the past and its legacies in the present. More specifically, we believe that understanding ideas about nations, states, time, progress, Europe, violence and politics cannot be separated from critical discussion of how certain interpretations of history were produced and became dominant.

The idea of ‘race’ and the phenomenon of racism have not been sufficiently addressed in curriculum guidelines and history textbooks for Key Stage 3. This makes the comprehension of colonialism or transatlantic slavery extremely difficult. The dominant approach to racism views it as the product of wrong doctrines or extremist ideologies – a vision that, incidentally, also exists in politics and in academia – which is particularly visible in the so-called ‘new imperialism’ of the 19th century, in Italian fascism and in German Nazism. This understanding of racism as an *exception* or as *the past* of European history does not allow it to be considered prior to its consolidation through pseudoscientific treatises (especially in the 18th and 19th centuries). We therefore argue that it is crucial to consider the historical processes through which the everyday ideas, structures and socio-political and economic practices that characterise colonial conquest and the formation of nation states since the 15th and 16th centuries have been racially constructed.

Narratives of slavery are a paradigmatic example of this concept, viewing it as an inevitable system – a consequence of the economic ‘needs’ of *that time*, rather than political decisions taken on different levels, with doctrinal support and the complicity of the religious hierarchy. Although the immorality and ‘inhumanity’ of slavery are reported, a deeper approach is needed, allowing for a consideration of how ‘race’ is embedded in economic, political and cultural processes, so that students can understand its legacy in contemporary European societies.

The issues raised in this booklet about history teaching reveal the formulas most commonly deployed to report and approach historical phenomena that are crucial to an understanding of modern societies. These questions are not limited to education, since they are visible in a wide range of broader political and academic debates – such as those on immigration, racism, interculturality and *Lusophony*.

Methodological file

Methodology The study focused on three aspects: 1) **Analysis of textbooks, education policies and recommendations**; 2) **Interviews and discussion groups** with a variety of relevant actors; 3) **Participatory workshops** to debate and disseminate the results.

Textbooks and themes Our analysis focused mainly on **history textbooks for compulsory education at KS3** (Years 7 to 9) during the 2008-2009 school year, selecting the five best-selling editions in Portugal, according to official information provided. Given the scope of the history curriculum in this cycle – ranging from the so-called ‘pre-History’ to ‘contemporaneity’ and including national, European and world history – the following themes were selected for a more detailed analysis:

Year 7 | *From gatherer societies to the first civilisations*

The formation of the western Christianity and Islamic expansion

Year 8 | *Expansion and change in the 15th and 16th centuries*

Portugal in the context of 17th and 18th century Europe

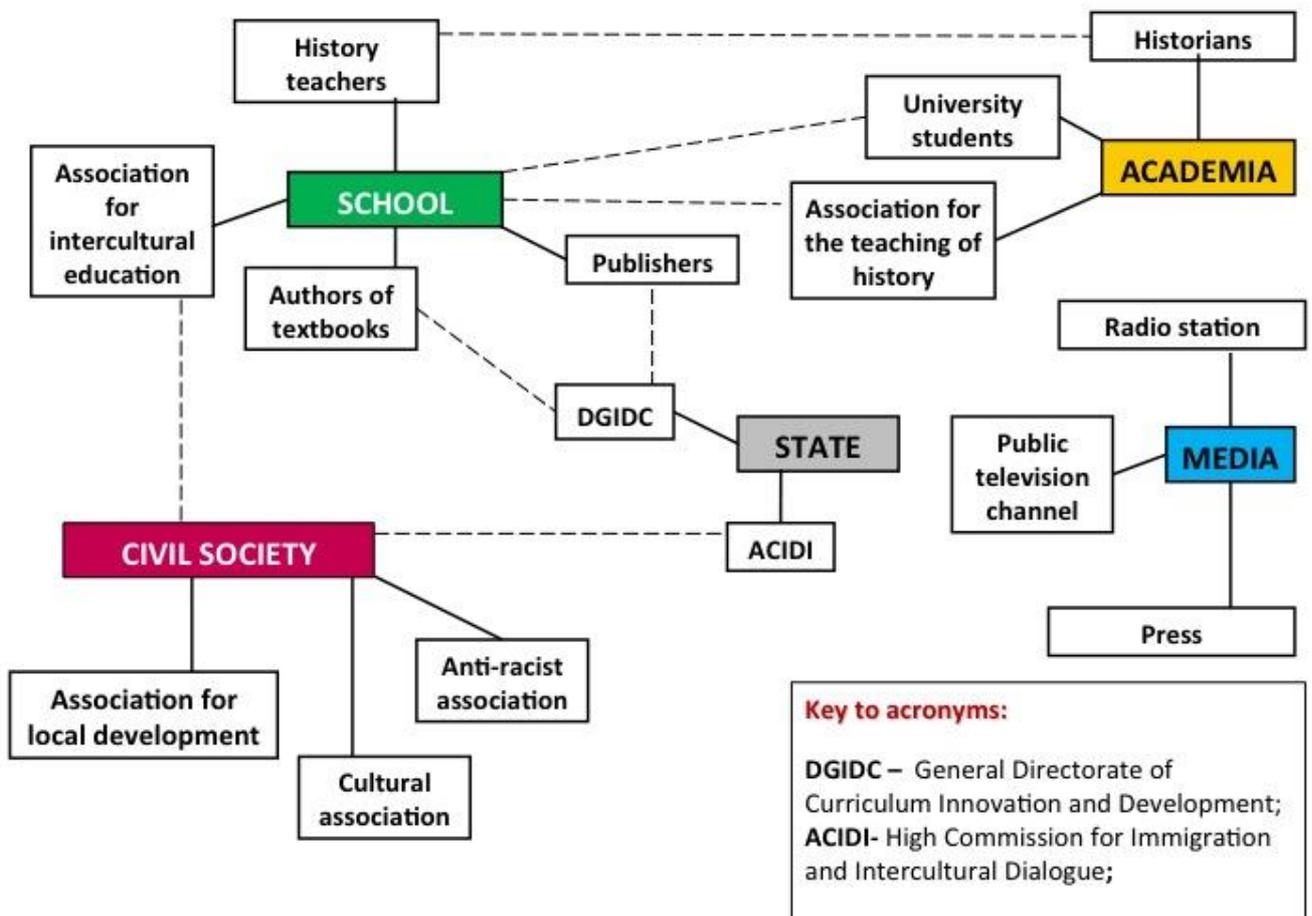
Year 9 | *Europe and the world on the verge of the 20th century*

From post-WWII to the cultural challenges of our time

In order to develop certain themes further and introduce a comparative perspective, we also analysed textbooks from other periods (1977-2003) and contexts (Mozambique, South Africa, Spain, and the United Kingdom).

Educational policies With a view to mapping the official legislation and directives within education, we analysed the legal documents issued within the Portuguese framework after the restoration of democracy in 1974. We also mapped the global, regional and national debates related to history teaching and textbooks, namely those promoted by **UNESCO, the European Council, the Ministry of Education and the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries**.

Empirical work As part of our empirical work, we engaged in dialogue with different actors involving the following questions: a) the production and dissemination of historical knowledge; b) public policies, the curriculum and textbooks; c) the writing and production of textbooks; d) the pragmatics of history teaching; e) the involvement of media and civil society organisations in the debates (see diagram).



More information on the project

www.ces.uc.pt/projectos/rap

